The Southern Movement in Yemen

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During the past year, people of the former South Yemen Republic have joined a popular movement demanding fair rule and equal citizenship against which the Yemeni government has taken harsh methods. While the western world concentrates on Al-Qaida and kidnapped tourists, the movement has taken a visible presence on the Internet, which offers a whole new platform for political protest.

In a video clip posted on Youtube, images of mutilated bodies follow one another followed by the grim face of the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the text "In this image he is swearing, swearing to clean the land from the owners … us!!" It continues showing maps of Southern Yemen with the text "Our land, our country South Arabia" ending with the announcement "We don't believe in war and power, we will return our land in peace." The background music from the popular rock group Linkin Park with the song "In the End" lends a youthful tone to the clip.[1]

While most of the picture material comes from the London-based opposition movement's Sout al-Ganoub (The Voice of the South) website that forms only one arm of the locally rooted movement, the sentiments in the video reflect well those prevalent throughout the country itself. The video has triggered months-long discussions. One participant, Oneyedboxer, expresses sentiments common among Adeni youth towards the Northern Yemeni rulers: "don't you forget your Imam(s) locked you for years from civilization; don't you forget that when European officials came to visit North Yemen they used to tell you that they are Jinns with blue eyes, so that you don't talk to them… How do you expect a government with ninety percent of its people illiterate to rule? Shame on you to have someone rule over you who does not even have a high school diploma. This is not a war of the South and North, it's a war of Ideology."

These and similar voices to be found on the Internet point to today's social and political dissent in what used to be South Yemen, which has roots in the uneven state-society relationship and the imbalanced development of the two parts of the country. Since Yemeni unification this imbalance has to some extent deepened despite opposite expectations, resulting in protests and mass demonstrations. While such protest have been stifled by the government, the movement's presence on the Internet is harder to silence.

Unification of the "one Yemeni homeland"

In the area that forms today's Republic of Yemen, a centralized administration and state territorial control have proved to be difficult tasks. The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) came into being from a long and violent civil war (1962-1969) that brought Egyptian troops and civil servants to an area basically untouched by foreign rule. The republican state never managed to establish full territorial sovereignty and large parts of Northern and Eastern regions still today remain under tribal control. In the South, the rulers managed to do something the British had failed a little earlier when in 1967 they formed a nation state out of the British Colony (Aden) and the two Aden protectorates: the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).

Whereas the unification in 22 May 1990 was at first enthusiastically welcomed by everybody in Yemen, years that followed crushed the illusions in the South. High inflation, inefficiency in running the state fiscals, centralization of state bureaucracy and the accompanied marginalization of Southern administrative centres formed the basis of dissatisfaction. Once World Bank policies started to frame socio-economic development impoverishment befell not only the poor but also many among the middle sectors of society. These were accompanied by kidnappings, house robberies, and murders of Southern politicians – presumably linked to president Saleh. By 1993 it became clear that the unity was not on a solid ground and the Southern leaders withdrew to Aden. The short but devastating civil war was fought in early summer of 1994 between the Northern and Southern army factions. Emerging from the war, Southern popular sentiment was that the honeymoon was over and what had come to replace it was simply Northern occupation.

With unity came also a political culture unfamiliar to the South. Corruption and dishonesty substituted earlier good governance.[2] It also became evident that the multi-party system actually meant choosing the "right" party, one that has access to state funds and can deliver everything from development schemes to land properties and government jobs. Ever since the harmony of the early years of unity when government posts were distributed evenly between Southerners and Northerners, there has been no question that the party that delivers is the People's General Congress, the party of the Republic's President.

To the disillusionment of the Southerners, the authoritarian system of one party rule was simply replaced by clientelism which demanded unreserved loyalty to the government in exchange for personal benefits such as a government jobs, expensive cars, or pieces of land; a practice they imagined to have originated in the North. Moreover, hard-line religious moralizing that spread among the Southerners has contributed to the marginalization of women's earlier visible roles in the public sphere.[3]

There are also economic reasons for dissent. During the 1994 war factories in Aden were affected. Machines and raw materials were demolished or looted and factories had to send workers, mostly women, home. With a salary from the state, these workers just stayed at home until years later came their retirement. Now these former factory workers, people in their best productive years, are bitter. With a small pension that hardly covers daily expenses, they do not waste time in job seeking since hardly any new job opportunities have been created. Dr Suad Uthman Abdulrahim from Aden University suggests that not only rivalry for markets hit the factories but also greed for huge land properties that the closed factories could release.[4] Hunt for lucrative land properties has been one of the activities in which the elite has been busily engaged. According to some estimates, the Northern elite has taken possession of fifty percent of Adeni land. While part of the land acquisitions are disputed and some even litigated in court, most land distributed is state land without previous private owners.

But political and economic factors are not the only sources of dissent; some believe that the two parts of the country have irreversibly different cultures, too. While in the North it was common in the early years of unity to believe that Southerners are "disbelievers" and that their women are "loose," in the South many viewed Northerners as "ignorant" and "looters of state property." Despite early hope that the two Yemens will slowly come together in terms of customs and psychology, Southerners now think that it is impossible to live with "those people" since their culture is entirely different from that of the South. This attitude is visible in the manner in which the "South" is symbolically constructed in the popular dissent. Bad governance and corruption is thought to be characteristic of the Northern culture at large. According to this constellation, the North is imagined as a community of tribes and tribal thinking while people in the South are adherents of a nation state ruled by state law. Thus the new Southern state is not designed to replicate the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen but to be built according to principles of equal citizenship.

Protests

In late spring 2007 dissent started to culminate in public demonstrations and increased criticism was voiced in opposition newspapers and civil society media. Popular protests spread throughout the former South Yemen and the slogan of *infisāl* (separation) was also raised

among *al-harakat al-ganubiyyat* (Southern movement) as the movement is popularly known. The movement is particularly strong in Hadhramaut governorate to the east where most of oil wealth comes from. The activities there have included stopping Northern people from buying or confiscating land, erecting road blocs to harass drivers with Northern license plates, and pushing demands for getting at least twenty percent of the oil income.

The Southern movement has no national leadership or joint organization and locally takes a variety of forms. It has been most active in small towns in Dhala' governorate, some hundred kilometres north of Aden where the 1963 Southern revolution had its starting point. These locally based initiatives are not necessarily connected to exiled Yemenis who have formed the Southern Democratic Assembly (TAJ) in London, or with the National Opposition Front (MOWJ), an older resistance coalition working from outside but active on the Internet.

The movement unites people of all social strata. It was sparked in spring 2007 by popular protests organized by the Yemeni Retired Military Consultative Association, formed by former military commanders and army men. Following the 1994 reorganization of the army, these men feel they have faced systematic discrimination. Often accompanied by unemployed youth, former civil servants and factory workers, as well as human rights activists, demonstrations have been staged in front of local government premises. Due to lack of job opportunities and discrimination in access to foreign education, youth with university and high school diplomas have also joined the movement. Since the revolution this is the first time young people have taken an active role in politics, which predicts a good future for civil society activities in the South at large.

Notwithstanding the arrest of leaders of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), political parties and the opposition united in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) largely remain outside the movement. These parties, most notably the Islah Party (Congregation for Reform) and the YSP took a long time to announce support to the movement. In addition, activists of the movement regard the opposition parties' cooperation with the government with aversion.

PHOTO BY SUSANNE DAHLGREN, 2008

A sit-in in support of the opposition newspaper al-Ayaam in March 2008 in Aden

Secession or federation

While most people in the South view that a change is necessary, not all agree that secession would be the right solution. Another scheme is federation where each governorate (Yemen is divided into 21 governorates) could enjoy autonomy, including deciding on its own norms for public morality. A group of religious personalities recently demanded the establishment of a state body to monitor public virtues in the manner of Saudi Arabia, causing alarm among Southerners.

In another upsetting incidence Nasir al-Shaibani, the former Minister of Religious Endowments (*awqaf*) and currently preacher in a Northern mosque, issued a fatwa against the protestors calling them "Infidels" and "Communists" who want to "Christianize and Americanize the country," thus applying rhetoric typical to some Islamist groups throughout the Middle East. In response, the Coordination Council of Military and Civil Retirees Societies, joined by the unemployed youth committees in all Southern governorates, filed a lawsuit against the former minister accusing him of instigating bloodshed in the demonstrations.

Still the question of secession and re-establishing a state to the territory that used to be the PDRY is not an uncomplicated issue. Historically a big number of Adenis have roots in Ta'izz area just across the former border. These Adenis object to any secession even if otherwise favourable to the Southern cause. While culturally Ta'izz resembles the South, inclusion of this fertile area in a secessionist state would be out of the question for the mighty Northern highland tribes. To the Yemeni state the movement poses a big challenge alongside other problems caused by sympathizers of Al-Qaida and the armed conflict that was going on in the Northern province of Sa'ada for years, all making foreign analysts call Yemen a potential failed state.[5] It is evident that the government cannot just suppress the movement and disregard its demands. Throughout Yemen similar anti-government protests have occurred where demands for price regulation, fair rule, measures to eradicate poverty and equal distribution among regions of national resources, and development schemes have been raised. Unless the movement stops being framed as a movement for the South it is unlikely that it will be united with Northern cities where the above demonstrations have taken place. A lot will depend on the changes that are evident when Ali Abdullah Saleh's presidential term ends in 2013.

Still the Southern Movement has attracted also Northerners in its ranks. One of the most well-known is Dr Muhammad al-Saqqaf, lawyer and university professor who has joined the demands for secession from the North. When I met him in a sit-in in Aden in March 2008, he enthusiastically showed the orange t-shirt and basketball cap that he brought from Dhala'. In waiting for international attention, the Dhala'ian movement has created a visual image and presence on the Internet, inspired by Eastern European popular uprisings. With these postmodern elements to fashion the popular uprising, the movement wants to show the world that the Southern Yemeni cause deserves global media attention, the way of other troubled lands of Tibet, Zimbabwe or Ukraine. While the protests have continued a good part of 2008, the Southern rebellion finally made top headlines in all international news networks at the end of March 2008 to be faded under news about the "Yemeni Al-Qaida."

Parliamentary elections are due in April 2009. However, people joke about their need to get to vote in the US elections as whatever happens on the superpower's political stage will have a bigger effect on their lives than the results of the Yemeni elections.

Meanwhile, in a manner typical to Yemeni politics at large, elite response to the problems in the South has been to establish new "civil society" bodies. Two competing committees have been established to ensure a smooth move towards a democratic process and to end the civil unrest. The first one, established by Presidential Decree and headed by one of President's Southern allies, was charged with the task to evaluate the situation in the South and to find solutions to calm down popular dissent and to work towards enhancing national unity. A competing committee, the Yemeni Centre for Historical Studies and Future Strategies, was to follow, set up by prominent Northern army generals, and members of the political elite and intelligentsia from both South and North. While it is clear that the former committee works in close contact with the government and the latter one with the opposition parties, it remains to be seen whether this truly Yemeni solution to the problem, setting up of new "NGOs" to hold meetings preferably in five-star hotels, ever finds feasible solutions to the deep-rooted dissent prevalent throughout the country.

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Notes

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaBhzsUz6E0.
2. On corruption in Yemen, see A. S. al-Dahı, *al-fasad fil-yaman. Al-asbab, al-muzahir, al-nitadhig, al-mu'alagat*. The Arab Center for Strategic Studies Monthly Monograph Series no. 40, 2006.
3. See S. Dahlgren, *Contesting Realities. Morality, Propriety and the Public Sphere in Aden, Yemen* (University of Helsinki Press 2004).
4. S. 'Uthmān 'Abd al-Rahīm, *al-khaskhasat wal-mar'at al-'āmilat*. The Arab Center for Strategic Studies Monthly Monograph Series no. 11, 2000.
5. J.M. Sharp, *Yemen: Where is the Stability Tipping Point?*, Arab Reform Bulletin Vol. 6 issue 6, July 2008. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, www.carnegieendowment.org.